

Rousseau, Kant, and Tolstoy at Groninger Forum

Re-thinking democracy today

Natalia Danilkina

On 10 December 2016, the Groninger Forum gave the floor to young scholars. The meeting in the university city of Groningen brought together researchers originating from Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland and Russia. The day-long discussions on democratic values and the value of democracy put a number of underestimated issues on the common agenda. The ups and downs of modern European democracy invited such topics as human rights in the East and West, “universalism” and “cultural particularism”, national and supranational values, the questions of war and peace, etc.

Philosophers and scientists sought for necessary conditions of social and individual well-being in contemporary political theories, history of philosophy and world’s literature, in the specifics of concepts and peculiarities of human nature. What is the aim we are heading to, if any? Is this aim fully achievable or does it have an eternal intrinsic potential, like the Greek telos? Are our aims or values fully “ours”? And are they really shared in the so-called West? The workshop participants emphasised the controversies between universal claims and actual cultural data, political commitment to globalisation and the rise of nationalist political activism, addressed the problems of civic education and media culture.

Ethical and religious matters were in the focus of the dispute on the common good. “A part of the European establishment identifies the government’s activities as a mixture

of technical competences and political skills,” – says one of the speakers, Dr. Carlo Scognamiglio. “Unlike the highly religious societies, the Western social system seems dominated by the obsession for productivity races and stock market indices. For this reason, it is often so difficult for us to understand behaviours and choices of other cultures, which may be explicitly engaged in the pursuit of ethical and religious values. We have to understand that laicism is not a neutral approach compared to many different systems of values. Laicism is both an ethical and political choice, based on moral values like authenticity in relationships (Rousseau), but also freedom as a result of our reciprocal respect as persons (Kant). And if our political choices are not the mere result of technical skills, and need an ethical foundation, our duty, as philosophers, is to continue the discussion and the critical investigation on our values.”

The self-understanding of the western culture(s) appeared to be the motto of the convention. The current status of particular philosophical traditions was reevaluated. For centuries, philosophers have been advocating political ideas allowing people to enjoy their rights and liberties, providing guarantees of their freedom and safety, promoting human dignity and human rights, preventing the world from falling into the state of war. Does this help us find remedies against social, political and economic disorders today? Does the philosophy lack anything? Is there yet the “need of philosophy” in societies and communities we are living in? If yes, what kind of philosophy is needed?

The workshop “Democratic Culture(s)”, as well as the debate “The Common Good in Modern Philosophy and Contemporary Politics” over the recent book by Carlo Scognamiglio *Il bene comune. Ripensare la politica con Kant e Rousseau* were organized by the study group “Philosophy in Central and Eastern Europe”. The events were supported by the Dutch Research School of Philosophy (OZSW).